Loving Kindness, Movement of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 46:09

Today as part of our exploration of the movements of the heart, we want to take in not only the Brahma Vihara of loving kindness, but also tune in when the near enemy or far enemy is present, if they come. They'll probably come sometime in the next few days. So I want to talk a little bit about how to work with these forces when they arise in the mind.

Near enemy, remember, are different forms of desire or wanting or attachment in relation to our experience or the people that we bring in. The far enemy is the different forms of aversion or ill will, anger, resentment, fear, self-judgment that come. So as you're saying the metta phrases, if one of these states arises in the mind, don't be concerned. It's a natural part of the unfolding.

There are a few different ways to work when these states are present. If this hindrance—that's a classical description for the difficult states that arise in meditation—if the hindering energy, near or far enemy, is relatively mild, then you can just continue to say the metta phrases, continue to connect to the individual and leave it in the background. The way this works is that eventually the hindrance kind of gets held in the circle of metta that you're creating.

Normally when the hindrances come up, we don't like that they're there. We don't want them there. We want them replaced by metta. There's usually resistance to having them. That resistance itself is part of the far enemy of aversion. So rather than reacting with aversion to the arising of these hindrances, we want to have an attitude of metta or friendliness or acceptance toward these states. We don't need to judge them—they're part of all of us and they will come from time to time. We just want to learn about them when they're there. So we allow the metta to kind of encircle them and hold them, and then we don't need to make too big of a fuss about them.

So that's if they're fairly mild. Just allow them to be in the background, continue to connect with your person and express the metta intention.

But if the state gets stronger—very strong desire, very strong aversion, ill will or fear—you'll go to generate the metta intention and you won't be able to. This negative state is so heavy and thick that it really blocks the intention of caring. We can't find any sincere caring for ourselves or someone else. So if it's like that, the metta phrases won't really have any energy behind them, and then it's more skillful to form a direct relationship with this hindering energy.

There are two ways to do it. One is compassion, the other is vipassana, or mindfulness. I'd suggest going first to compassion. This afternoon we'll have a full guided session on compassion, but for now I'm going

to suggest you work with a simple phrase, which could be either, "May I hold this pain with compassion."

This acknowledges that the difficulty is present. Metta sometimes, in the emphasis on happiness, aims too high when one of these hindrances is there. So we can just say, "May I hold this with compassion?" And you can just call it pain, you can call it difficulty, you can name it—ill will, anger, fear, judgment, whatever you'd like. "May I hold it with compassion"—and just say that phrase for yourself, the compassion phrase for yourself, again and again, just as you've been saying the metta phrases.

Over time, that opposing energy will start to settle down, become weaker. When it does and you feel you can return to the metta intention, then do that. You can drop the compassion phrase, go back to your metta phrases, and just carry on with your practice as before.

If you're with the compassion phrase for quite a while and it doesn't seem to be shifting anything—there's no loosening of the resistance, there's no change in the way you're relating—then move to mindfulness practice. Drop the phrases and just sit with an awareness of the experience of this state. You can feel it in your body, feel it in your mind, in the emotional field, and just pay attention to it like you were doing a meditation in Vipassana on a difficult emotion. Then after some period of time, normally that kind of attention will allow the state to come through, open up. We don't resist it. We want to allow it to express itself. And then that will let it move through.

It may take two minutes. It may take five minutes. It may take an hour. It may take longer. But at some point it will move through. And when it does or gets weaker, then go back to your metta phrases.

So these are the three lines of response: If it's not too strong, let it be in the background, continue with metta. That's number one. Number two, if it's stronger and blocks the metta intention, switch to compassion—do compassion for yourself and think, "May I hold this with compassion." And the third way: drop the Brahma Vihara practice and turn to mindfulness. Just be present, allowing the experience of the emotion in the mind and body.

May none of these arise for any of you. Today in the metta meditation we're going to expand again the field of individuals.

And to the self and benefactor we'll add this third individual who's called the friend or the good friend or the dear friend.

As you think about who you'd like to bring in to this category, there may be a few people who want to come audition for the role to have a spot at the table. So it's fine to check two or three people out during this period and feel who would be the best fit for your friend.

It's best to pick someone where the relationship isn't too complicated. Often with friendships, there come in a number of mixed feelings. The simpler the relationship is, the more accessible the metta will be, the straighter metta will be with the friend. So look for a friend where the relationship is not too complicated.

If you pick a friend who's in a lot of suffering, the tone of the metta will tend to lean more toward compassion, which is okay, but it's helpful to pick someone where there's not overpowering suffering so that the metta can come through as metta.

As I mentioned last night, it's good to pick someone where there's not a strong physical attraction so that the desire force isn't so mingled in with the metta. Again, the metta can just be cleaner with someone like that.

So feel free to try a few different friends in this category as we go through the meditation this morning. And as with the benefactor, over the course of the morning or the day, try to settle on one person that you'd like to use as your friend consistently for the rest of the retreat.

To kind of warm the field up, we'll again go through some period with metta for ourself, metta for benefactor, and then we'll introduce the friend partway through the sitting.

So please sit comfortably.

Beginning again by coming into your body and letting go of any obvious areas of holding. Relaxing the face, the shoulders, the belly. Feeling yourself sitting, feeling yourself breathing.

Bringing the attention into the heart center, just the area of the center of the chest. Feeling a few breaths in and out through the heart center. Let the heart center be your avenue for connecting with yourself.

Getting a sense of your own personality and character, your being. Remembering what you like about yourself, your good qualities. Remembering some kind actions you've done toward others. And remembering your wish for happiness, which is a beautiful thing in all of us. It's what leads us to the path and leads us to growth.

So beginning with a conviction in your own basic goodness, knowing that happiness follows goodness, the metta wishes are rightful for you. They're appropriate.

So beginning to direct the thoughts of loving kindness to yourself:

May I be safe from harm.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I be peaceful.
May I live in harmony with the body.
May I take care of myself happily in the world.

Occasionally after saying a phrase or a set of phrases, you might come back and touch again into the heart center and just notice whatever feeling is present. It could be an experience of loving kindness, its flavors of love, affection, acceptance, patience. There could be one of the hindering energies of near or far enemies—wanting, aversion, fear, judgment.

Just making space for that to be, letting it be just the way it is, not trying to force any particular feeling in the heart, letting the heart tell us what's happening. Allowing all the emotions to be held in the space of friendliness toward ourself, our whole experience held with acceptance.

And now if you're ready, bring in your benefactor. Feeling their presence in the moment through remembering what they look like, the sound of their voice, saying their name. As you feel your benefactor's presence, remember the qualities that you appreciate a lot in them and the ways that they've helped you. So as you stay connected to your benefactor and their goodness, directing the thoughts of loving kindness to them.

And now if you feel ready, you can bring in the person that you will take on as your dear friend. A friend is usually someone who's in more of a peer relationship with us than the benefactor is. You may need to look among a few of your friends and try a couple to see who will be the best fit.

It's helpful as you begin the exercise with the friend to find someone where the metta is fairly straightforward, not colored with too much ambivalence or attraction.

So please take a moment and select the person you'd like to bring in as the friend. As you select the person, then try to feel their presence here and now, as though they're sitting in the room in front of you. You could bring up an image of them or say their name. Remember times that you've spent together.

As you connect with your friend, remember all the things that you really enjoy in this person. All their beautiful and noble qualities—good heart, generosity, care for justice, for the earth, kindness, intelligence, responsibility. Remember the ways that they've shown you their love for you, the ways they've touched you. Remember their own wish for happiness.

their longing for peace, their struggles and joys, their vulnerability. And as you hold all of this in your awareness, allow your heart to extend loving wishes toward them.

Begin to send to your friend the same phrases you've been cultivating for yourself and your benefactor. Feel free to let the words vary slightly if that feels more authentic:

May you be safe and protected from harm, as I wish to be safe.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and strong.
May you live with the ease of well-being.

Periodically return your attention to the heart center, simply noticing whatever emotions are present there. Allow all the different feelings you have about this friend to coexist—the warmth and appreciation, but also perhaps small traces of hurt, envy, or moments of distance that exist even in our closest relationships. This is the beautiful complexity of friendship. Hold it all with acceptance and metta, allowing your predominant intention to be one of genuine caring and well-wishing.

If you can refresh the image of your friend before each phrase or set of phrases, this will keep the connection alive and personal, making the metta more vibrant and immediate.

For today's practice, please continue working with the friend throughout your meditation periods. You'll likely discover that different individuals evoke different flavors of metta within you. The benefactor might kindle one quality of love—perhaps respect or gratitude—while the friend awakens another—maybe tenderness or joy. Some practitioners find the benefactor category really opens their heart, while others discover the friend is their gateway to metta. Both responses are perfectly natural. Give substantial time to each category so you can experience how they each support and strengthen your practice in their own way.

In your sitting and walking periods today, continue to begin with yourself for ten to fifteen minutes or longer if you feel drawn. You can include the benefactor for a shorter time—perhaps five to ten minutes—but dedicate the majority of each period to the friend, really exploring and deepening this relationship through metta.

Questions and Responses

One practitioner shared that his friend feels like such a brother that he finds himself naturally saying "may we be happy" rather than "may you be happy." This inclusive approach is perfectly fine. You might even find yourself walking together down the path in your imagination, held together in that loving "we."

Another question about dealing with sleepiness during metta practice: Use all the same techniques you would employ in vipassana meditation. Open your eyes, straighten your posture, take a few energizing breaths. And absolutely feel free to stand for your metta practice—it's much harder to fall asleep standing up, and standing meditation demonstrates beautiful energy and commitment. Don't hesitate to stand right in the middle of a group sitting if needed.

This afternoon at four o'clock, we'll begin exploring the other Brahma Viharas with a guided meditation on compassion. This introduction will be especially valuable as you continue working with difficult emotions that arise during practice. Compassion becomes an invaluable tool for meeting both your own suffering and the suffering of others with wisdom and kindness.

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